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JESUS' ATTITUDE TO THE OLD TESTAMENT:  
AN EXPOSITION OF MARK 7:1-23

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Did Jesus accept the Old Testament as unquestioned authority for himself and others, or was he a critic of the Old Testament teaching? This question must be of genuine interest to Christian people until some considerable agreement is reached concerning its answer. If Jesus did not question the precepts of the Old Testament, but, instead, approved them without qualification as a standard of authority, many Christians will continue to feel that his example is authoritative for Christians now. If, on the contrary, the Great Teacher was a critic of the scriptures of his age and accepted or rejected their teachings according to whether those teachings were or were not in accord with another standard to which he adhered, then we shall have not only the precedent of his example in the study of the Old Testament, but also a fruitful suggestion as to its meaning and value. What, then, was Jesus' attitude to the Old Testament?

For an answer to this question perhaps no better material can be found than that which is offered by the first twenty-three verses of the seventh chapter of Mark. The narrative has often been understood to mean that Jesus repudiated the tradition of the Jewish elders as it had been developed through scribal interpretation, and, by his approval of a quotation from Isaiah and of the Fifth Commandment, gave the whole Old Testament authoritative sanction as "the word of God." Recently Mr. J. H. A. Hart, in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (July, 1907), has put forth a learned argument to show that Jesus not only criticized the Decalogue and declared the Fifth Commandment not binding if the Korban vow had been taken as a supreme dedication of one's life to God, but also approved the scribal dialectics which supported this position. Is either of these views correct, or must they both give place to a third which the evidence seems better to support?

## GUIDE MARKS IN THE NARRATIVE

The narrative furnishes some data concerning whose meaning there can hardly be any serious difference of opinion, and these data may properly serve as guide marks in determining the meaning of other details which, from the point of view of the significance of the passage as a whole, are more or less subordinate.<sup>1</sup>

1. From vss. 2 and 5 it is evident that Jesus' disciples already, at the beginning of the incident, were in the habit of disregarding the Jewish tradition and custom concerning the washing of hands, for it was when the Pharisees and scribes "saw some of his disciples eating with unwashed hands" that they presented their inquiry to Jesus. This probably implies that Jesus had trained his disciples to disregard the custom of hand-washing. They might have come to disregard it in other ways, to be sure, but, since they were following him as a teacher, they must have conducted themselves at least with his approval, and it seems more probable that they had learned directly from him.

2. The quotation from Isaiah in vs. 6 implies that Jesus criticized and rejected the Jewish adherence to tradition and custom. If that was not Jesus' attitude to the scribes' teaching, he could hardly have called his questioners "hypocrites" and have accused them of offering mere lip service instead of genuine service of heart.

3. The language of Jesus in vss. 14-23 is manifestly a criticism and repudiation of the Mosaic legislation concerning ceremonial clean and unclean animals, such legislation, for example, as that of Lev. 11:1-23, which forbids the eating of hare, swine, many kinds of birds, water animals, and others. There can be no uncertainty about this, as the narrative stands, for the evangelist comments on the language of Jesus with the remark that Jesus, in what he was saying, "made all food clean" (vs. 19).

<sup>1</sup> I assume here that the Mark account reproduces the general situation in which Jesus was and his language with substantial accuracy. To go back of the account as it stands—investigating its sources and perhaps reconstructing the text—would be out of place in this article. Indeed, it would demand an entire volume by itself, for it would involve the whole problem of the sources of the synoptic material. Hart's interpretation, already referred to, rests largely on a radical reconstruction of the text, which, for the reason just mentioned, cannot be considered here. Mr. Hart has not offered any very substantial grounds for the reconstruction of the text which he makes. Perhaps he will do so later.

4. Vss. 8 and 9 show that Jesus held firmly to "the command of God." He manifestly contrasted this term with "the tradition of the elders," and inasmuch as he had already rejected the tradition, there remains only one of two possibilities: either he approved the command of God, or he rejected this as well as the Jewish tradition and accepted some third standard outside of both. No such third standard is even suggested by the narrative. Instead, Jesus seems, by the very manner of the contrast and by the further charge against the Jews (vs. 13) that they annulled "the word of God" (evidently a term equivalent to "the command of God" in vss. 8 and 9), to indicate beyond reasonable doubt that "the command of God," which was also "the word of God," was the standard which he accepted. In addition to these considerations, most readers of the gospels, if not all, will have no hesitation in saying that there is a presumption in favor of Jesus' adherence to "the word of God" as a standard, rather than to any other, whatever he may have meant by the term, since his fidelity to God is one of the most palpable aspects of his teaching and life. We may assume, therefore, that Jesus approved and maintained "the command of God."

#### SOME IMPORTANT INFERENCES

The basis of thought presented by the above guide marks, together with other elements which the narrative affords, warrants some important inferences concerning the meaning of several different portions of the passage

1. Jesus accepted the Fifth Commandment as the "command of God." This is seen in the fact that, after Jesus had approved "the command of God," as over against tradition, he quoted the Fifth Commandment (vs. 10) as proof of his assertion, following this with a statement of the scribal position. That is, as vss. 11 and 12 represent the scribal tradition, so the quotation of the Decalogue in vs. 10 represents "the command of God." The maintenance of the scribal regulation concerning the Korban, Jesus said, involved the disregard of the command of God which the Fifth Commandment presented.

2. Jesus disapproved the Korban practice of the Jews. Mr. Hart's interpretation is not sustained by the passage as it stands, and

it can be defended only by a radical reconstruction of the text, for which he has not given us any sufficient basis.

3. The practice of Korban was only one of many things which the Jews were doing, Jesus declared, which annulled the word of God. This is the meaning of vs. 13, the language of which is extremely concise and is suggestive rather than definitely descriptive.

4. Jesus condemned the scribal insistence on hand-washing and the Mosaic distinction between clean and unclean food as demands of religion. Probably he intended to include these two practices among the "many things" of vs. 13 which annul the word of God, for the "again" at the beginning of vs. 14 and other details of the narrative suggest a closeness of relationship between the thought of vss. 11 to 13 and that which follows. Whether he intended to so include them or not, his teaching is the same. Face to face with the question of the authority of tradition and with the law of clean and unclean food, he frankly rejected the authority of tradition (vss. 6-13) and freely set aside the law of clean and unclean food (vss. 14-23) as religiously valueless and invalid.

5. In thus repudiating the ceremonial law concerning clean and unclean food, Jesus obviously repudiated so much of the Mosaic legislation as was involved in that ceremonial law, that is, he criticized, disapproved, and rejected portions of the teaching of the Old Testament.

6. In a single brief discussion, therefore, Jesus accepted and emphasized one portion of the Old Testament and rejected another portion. He approved one Old Testament precept as "the command of God," while he frankly threw aside another Old Testament precept as neither binding nor useful. Accordingly, an Old Testament statement cannot be *ipso facto* the command of God, the word of God.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> How Jesus would have defined "the word of God" as a generic concept we are not in a position to say on the basis of any direct statement or clear example that has come down to us from him. The phrase obviously means that which expresses the thought or will of God. But what was the criterion by which an assertion or command could be recognized as expressing the thought of God he has not expressly stated. Yet so far as concerns commands we shall not be far wrong, however, if we regard his statement concerning the two great commands (Mark 12:28-31) as an embodiment, substantially and in brief form, of that which constitutes the underlying principle of any word of God. Teachings which work out in love, that is, for the highest moral welfare of men, are the command and word of God. Cf. Luke 8:11,

Approving some portions of the Old Testament and applying to them the predicate "word of God," he at the same time criticized and rejected others.

7. Altogether we are to conclude that Jesus' attitude to the Old Testament was that of a student and critic. He accepted that which approved itself to him; he put aside that which, according to his own high standard, he found to be without value. He treated the Old Testament in the same manner in which he dealt with scribal tradition. If the Old Testament received less severe arraignment and more frequent approval—and such was manifestly the case—that was because the Old Testament so much more truly presented the abiding principles which are the thought of God.

#### A TRANSLATION

The meaning of some details of the passage will be brought out more clearly through a translation of the most significant portions, a translation expanded at some points into a paraphrase:

1. And there gathered about him the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> 2. And when they saw some of his disciples eating bread with "common" hands, that is, with hands unwashed, . . . 5. the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do not your disciples conduct themselves in accordance with the tradition from the ancients?" 6. Jesus replied, "Isaiah admirably described you hypocrites, in these words,

These people esteem me with their lips,  
But their heart is far from me:  
7. Their worship before me is futile,  
For their teachings are rules of men.

8. You desert the command of God and support the tradition of men." 9. And

21; 11:28, and John 17:14, which seem to make Jesus' own teachings the word of God and thus indicate more fully and concretely what he had in mind when he emphasized the supremacy of the two great commands to which attention has just been called. Cf. also John 7:16, 17.

<sup>3</sup> I make vs. 1 a complete statement, following the punctuation of Tischendorf, Weiss, and the majority of textual authorities. This makes the visit of the Pharisees and scribes the result of the general report of Jesus' activities, which seems natural, not the result of his disciples' neglect of hand-washing, as the Revised Version seems to do. The punctuation which I adopt also makes the particular inquiry of the Jewish leaders the outcome of what they saw the disciples doing as they came, which is likewise natural.

he went on to say to them: "You admirably<sup>4</sup> set aside the command of God in order to observe your own tradition. 10. This is seen in the fact that Moses, in giving the command of God, said, 'Honor thy father and thy mother,' and, 'Let him who speaks ill of father or mother be put to death;' 11. but *you* say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "That with which you might have been assisted by me is Korban"' [that is, consecrated to God];<sup>5</sup> 12. you no longer allow him to do anything for his father or mother; 13. and thus you annul the word of God by your tradition. And this custom of Korban is only one among many such violations of God's word which you practice." 14. And he addressed himself again to the people, saying, "All of you, listen to me and give careful attention. . . ."

The thought of the remaining verses is comparatively simple. In them Jesus insisted that a man is not injured morally or religiously by eating ceremonially unclean food. A man is injured by what he says and does, for these things produce character and, if they are unworthy, deprive him of recognition according to the law of God.

#### SUMMARY

The results of this study, together with references to other instances of Jesus' use of the Old Testament which illustrate and support the conclusions here reached and which the reader may like to consider, may be summarized as follows:

1. Jesus frequently made use of the Old Testament in his teaching without raising the question of its authority. With vss. 6 and 7 above, compare Mark 1:44; 4:12; 8:18; 9:48; 13:14, 24-27; 14:62; Matt. 5:48; 11:10; John 13:18. In some of these instances the allusion may be only rhetorical.

2. Jesus sometimes appealed to the Old Testament as valid and authoritative instruction adapted to the needs of men. Such is the appeal in vs. 10 of the passage before us. With this compare Mark 10:19, 27; 11:17; 12:10, 11, 26, 29-31; 14:27; John 10:34, 35.

3. On occasion Jesus did not hesitate to question the authority of

<sup>4</sup> The word which I here translate "admirably" and the general form of the expression in which it occurs are exactly the same as at the beginning of verse six. Here the language is ironical. Our word "beautifully" also will very well translate the Greek adverb, especially in view of the fact that we sometimes use it ironically in expressions similar to that which Jesus used in this instance.

<sup>5</sup> The sentence breaks here in form, but not in thought. Jesus completed the statement by giving what the Pharisees and scribes were accustomed to do, instead of what they were accustomed to "say."

portions of the Old Testament and frankly to reject or modify those which did not measure up to his own higher standard. With the above rejection of the legislation concerning clean and unclean food, compare Mark 10:4-8, 11, 12; Matt. 5:31-48.

4. Jesus found in the Old Testament a principle, which he regarded as at the same time central to the Old Testament teaching and fundamental for morals and religion. Matt. 7:12; 22:37-40; 5:17-19. It is evident therefore that he regarded the Old Testament as fundamentally right in religion and ethics.

5. As a whole, Jesus was a student and critic of the Old Testament, discriminating among its various teachings and precepts and estimating their worth, regardless of their place in the scriptures of his time. As already indicated at the beginning of this discussion, the passage here studied illustrates fully Jesus' attitude to the Old Testament in these respects—his familiarity with it, his approval of some of its precepts, and his rejection of its unserviceable requirements. The following passages also illustrate the same points with varying degrees of fulness. They should be studied in the comprehensiveness which the references indicate, but the details of the language in each reference should be noted and its significance observed. The references include some of those already given to illustrate one or more of the above points, and are as follows: Mark 2:25-28; 9:11-13; 10:3-12; 12:19-27, 35-37; Matt. 5:17-48; 12:7.